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Chene Family in Detroit

by

Louise Rau

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BURTON HISTORICAL
COLLECTION LEAFLET

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Dear Sir,
The above is a copy of the
report of the committee.

Yours faithfully,
[Signature]

1. The committee has
recommended that the
report be published.

2008

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VOL. IX

SEPTEMBER, 1930

No. 1



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Editorial

The larger page on which the *Leaflet* now appears has been adopted to facilitate its preservation by readers. The wider margin is designed to admit perforations for convenient filing within loose-leaf covers.

With the advent of women and children, homes are established and civilization really begins. The cover illustration, reproduced from a mural by Gari Melchers in the delivery room of the Detroit Public Library, depicts the landing at Detroit of Madam Cadillac and Madam Tonty in the autumn of 1701. The picture might appropriately be entitled, "Civilization Enters the Northwest."

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The Chêne Family in Detroit

By LOUISE RAU

To the spirit of adventure which prompted migration, America in large part owes her rapid growth. Had her original settlers been content with their homes along the eastern shore, they would never have braved the hazards of life beyond the mountains. In the waterways of the continent, Nature furnished a road aeons before man had hewn one through the wilderness; and up these great highways came the explorer and the trader. Sometimes the westward trek is marked by generations—an individual emigrating to the frontier's rim, his son in turn pressing on to the new edge of civilization. Detroit, with the Great Lakes highway running by her door, offered a readily accessible home for the permanent settler or a depot from which the trader might set out upon his annual expedition. Here, in the year of Our Lord 1930, still live descendants of men who early ventured across the seas, families who saw the birth of the fair City of the Straits and contributed much to her development. Such a one is the Chêne family.

In the distant village of Barbayeux, France, lived Jean St. Onge and his wife, Anne Claveleau, to whom, in 1654, was born a son, Pierre St. Onge *dit* Chêne. Being ill content with the limited opportunities of the Old World, the youth migrated to Canada and set up a tailoring business in the prosperous town of Longueuil, the first stopping point of many French immigrants in America. In Montreal on November 29, 1676, he married Louise Jeanne, daughter of François Bailly *dit* LaFleur and Marie Fronteneau. Louise died before 1700, when Pierre married (second) in Montreal on October 9, Marie, widow of Jean Magnan and daughter of Charles Moitie and Nicole Chaise. Thus were the Chênes established in America.

"The division between the members of a race who migrate," writes Professor Carl Russell Fish, "and those who stay at home is not merely a severance but somewhat also a separation of kinds. . . . When migration is difficult, few but the adventurous come, ancestors of initiative and daring." And so Pierre, harkening to the siren which calls men to follow the frontier, made his way to Detroit; but Marie would not follow her lord; and, preferring the comforts of civilization, remained to die in Montreal in 1727—at least such we surmise to have been her reasons from the Detroit census of 1710 which carries the terse entry, "wife will not go to Detroit."

Whether Pierre came to Detroit with Cadillac in 1701, or whether reports of the prosperous new settlement reached him in far-away Montreal is not clear. On March 10, 1707, there was confirmed "To [one] Pierre Chesne by name, a site within Fort Pontchartrain of Detroit, having thirty feet frontage to Ste. Anne Street and twenty-two feet wide, adjoining on one side M. Joseph Depré, and on the other Estienne Bontron, on condition of paying three livres quit-rent and rent, and moreover and above [that], for other rights, which we have given up, the sum of ten livres each year on the 20th of March [payable] in good furs or, at first, in [any] coined money which then shall be current in this place." Thus did the long arm of the King of France retain its hold upon the citizens of Detroit, and the requisition of a quit-rent bring to the New World the feudalism of the Old. "Lots within the fort at Detroit were granted upon the condition of carrying on the necessary work of enclosing the stronghold without charge to the King, and of paying two sols rent for each front foot. These lots were also subject to an alienation fine of one-twelfth upon sale or exchange. For country land, the quit-rent was one sol for each front foot, and one-quarter bushel of wheat per acre."

In 1710, the Fathers of Detroit lodged in houses thatched with grass and built of upright stakes, the chinks plastered with mud to keep out the wintry blasts. Cadillac's house was no finer than the rest. Only two were built of horizontal logs, the chapel where the missionary lived and the warehouse of the Company. In this primitive community, Pierre Chêne, then aged about fifty-six years, was a man of high standing and participated in affairs of importance, as attested by the various documents to which we find his signature affixed.

In the fall of 1710, when De la Forest was appointed Commandant of Detroit to relieve Cadillac for his new labors as Governor of Louisiana, ill health prevented him from immediately assuming command, and Charles Regnault, Sieur Dubuisson, was detailed for temporary charge, with instructions that a census of the inhabitants be taken and a careful inventory of Cadillac's effects made.

The following June, Cadillac, after a winter of conflict with the over-bearing Dubuisson, wrote begging the Marquis de Vaudreuil, Governor and Lieutenant-General of New France, to clarify the situation and put matters on an equitable basis: "M. Dubuisson who commands . . . in the absence of M. de la Forest, has claimed that all the lands [here] belong to him, the mill, the cattle and generally all my goods, moveables or otherwise . . . according to the valuation of them which is to be made by skilled men; and to that end without more preliminaries, he has prohibited the miller from paying me for

the grinding of the mill, the inhabitants from paying me the income from my estates or the rent of my houses, and from buying my cattle, claiming that I have no right to sell or enjoy them."

In mid-summer, 1711, M. Raudot, the Intendant, drew up arrangements for the settlement of the dispute, which to the observer of two centuries later do not sound particularly favorable to Cadillac. However, the Intendant's word was supreme, and on August 25, 1711, the inventory was made and comes to us in some ten printed pages. Therein are listed the elaborate equipment necessary for the little Church of Ste. Anne, the crude tools used in carpentry and woodcraft, merchandise for the settlers and Indians, live stock, and personal effects. All these were left in the care of Pierre Roy, friend and staunch supporter of Cadillac, and Pierre Chêne and Antoine Magnant testified to the accuracy of the count. The recital of the difficulties Cadillac experienced in trying to secure payment for his possessions (variously valued at 30,000 and 125,000 livres) belongs to another tale.

The growth of a name is always interesting. As before noted, Jean St. Onge was the last Continental forebear of the Chêne line. For some reason, now unknown, the nickname Chêne was added, and his son Pierre became St. Onge *dit* Chêne. *Bois de chêne* is an oak tree. Was Pierre, perhaps, a man of mighty strength, thereby winning this sobriquet? The third generation shows the addition of yet another name, LaButte, which may have been derived from *butte*, a small embankment. The last nickname was borne only by the descendants of its original holder.

Three of the children of Pierre St. Onge *dit* Chêne and Louise Jeanne Bailey came to Detroit. Marie, born in Montreal, September 20, 1690, in 1714, married Jacques Godfroy de Mauboeuf of Three Rivers, who had entered upon the western trade some four years earlier. In 1719 he brought Marie to Detroit. Their son, Jacques II, first married an Indian, and second, Louise Clotilde Chapoton, daughter of Jean Chapoton, one of Detroit's earliest surgeons. During the siege of Pontiac, in 1763, he took the side of the savages and, since he had previously taken an oath of allegiance to the British government, was seized and sentenced to be hanged for treason. He was pardoned by Colonel John Bradstreet on condition that he safely conduct Captain Thomas Morris to the Illinois country. This task he faithfully performed, and lived on to a ripe old age.

Pierre's eldest son, Charles, born in Montreal on March 11, 1694, married in Detroit on January 18, 1722, Catherine Sauvage. In July, 1734, the French government granted to him Private Claim 16, later known as the Church Farm, which his heirs sold to William Bernard in 1762.

During or before 1717, Pierre Chêne *dit* LaButte (born in Montreal, July 23, 1698) joined his father in Detroit where he became a merchant and official interpreter to the Ottawa. At Fort St. Philip near Lake Erie, on May 25, 1728, he married Marie Magdelaine, the daughter of Marguerite Ouabankikove, a Miami, and Pierre Roy, friend of Cadillac. From the entry in Ste. Anne's Church Register, it appears that Detroit officially and socially was well represented. Among the witnesses was Nicholas Joseph Desnoyelles, who was later to become commandant of Detroit. He was also a member of the expedition of Pierre Gautier de la Vérendrye for discovering an overland passage to the Pacific and received the title, "commandant at the post of the western sea," in 1744. Marie Roy died in 1732, and Pierre married (second) Louise, daughter of François Lootman *dit* Barrois and Marie Anne Sauvage. A guest at this ceremony was Ives-Jacques Pean, Sieur de Livaudière, Major of Quebec, Chevalier of the Military Order of St. Louis, Commandant of Fort Pontchartrain. Born in Paris, M. Pean came to Canada, where in 1722, he married Marie Françoise Pecody. After having been in command of Forts Frontenac and Chambly, he became the twelfth commandant of Detroit in 1733, at which time there were but 17 soldiers and 80 men bearing arms at the post.

The psychology of that historic triangle, Indian, French, English, is hard to understand. Although there had been conflict between them from time to time, an inexplicable bond continued to exist between the French and Indians after the English took Detroit in 1760, and caused much trouble. Hough, in his Introduction to Lieutenant Jehu Hay's diary of the Pontiac siege, says: "The Indians had been taught by their French Allies, that the Grand Monarch of France was scarcely less Omnipotent than Diety, that he loved his red Children and would ultimately protect them." Greatly perverted accounts of the true relations existing between the two countries were circulated among the Indians, and undoubtedly did much to bring about the war. Sir William Johnson, veteran Superintendent of the Indian Department, in the same book, is quoted as having made the keen comment: "As the French well knew the Importance of the Indians, they wisely took Advantage of our [the English] Neglect . . . and although the Conveniency of Trade (with fair Speeches and Promises) induced them to afford both us and the French, Settlements in their Country, yet they have never understood such Settlements as a Dominion, especially as neither we, nor the French ever made Conquest of them; they have even repeatedly said at several Conferences in my Presence, that 'they were amused by both Parties with Stories of their upright Intentions, and that they made War for the Protection of the Indians' Rights, but that they plainly found it was carried

on, to see who would become Masters of what was the Property of neither one nor the other.' "

Whether hypocritically or not, Pontiac, the great Ottawa chief, stoutly maintained throughout all his bloody siege the self-righteous position that in driving out the English, he was merely keeping faith with his French Father for whose return he longed. This relation of the French and Indians greatly complicated the policy of Major Gladwin, the English Commandant. Some of the French could be relied upon for loyalty to their new sovereign, others were on the borderland of suspicion, and yet others were definitely known to be hostile and untrustworthy.

In the first class was Pierre Chêne *dit* LaButte, who as official interpreter to the Ottawa played a delicate and important rôle. Sympathetic to both races (his first wife had been the daughter of a Miami), his position was most difficult. On that day in early May when Pontiac and his forty braves presented themselves at Fort Pontchartrain, they requested LaButte, as he was called, to arrange for them to perform their peace-pipe dance before Major Campbell, the retiring Commandant. While the dancers were holding the attention of the settlers, ten of the Indians busied themselves in examining the condition of the fort. Soon after, Pontiac called a council of the Huron and Potawatomi at which he urged the extermination of the English. Plans were laid for an apparently friendly visit to the fort, when each warrior should conceal under his blanket a sawed-off gun, so that the soldiers might be taken completely by surprise. From this point the story varies; some writers credit Catherine, the beautiful Indian who was enamoured of the Commandant, with warning Major Gladwin; others say that the talented Angélique Cuillerier, later the wife of James Sterling, learned of the plot from the Indians who frequented her home; and still others say that Mahiganne, an Ottawa, not approving the plans of his chief, told of the intended attack. We shall doubtless never know the real savior of Detroit. As a result of the warning, the stage was set, and when Pontiac and his braves would have wiped out the little group of whites with one bloody stroke, he found himself thwarted. "He looked like a lioness from whom her young had been taken," wrote an eyewitness.

There is no need at this time to recount the nerve-racking days of that terrible spring and summer. Short of rations and with only a small supply of ammunition, Gladwin was at his wits' end. Would help come from down the lakes, or would they eventually be massacred? Even the comfort of the Church was denied the settlers, for it was feared that should the Indians hear the bell calling the devout

to worship, they would take advantage of the lessened guard to make an attack.

Over half a century later, Governor Cass in speaking of the fort in those days said: "The Garrison at the Beginning of the Siege consisted of one hundred and twenty-two Men and eight Officers, besides about forty Fur-traders and Engagées, who were more inclined to the French and were willing to be neutral. The Fort was Quadrilateral, with one Side near the water's Edge, and consisted of a single Row of Palisades twenty-five feet high, with Block-houses over the Gates and at the Angles. It contained two Six-pounders, one Three-pounder and three Mortars, badly mounted and calculated rather to inspire Terror than to do Execution among the skulking Savages who so assiduously watched the Fort, seldom venturing in Numbers within Range of the great Guns, but ready to take off the unlucky Person who might chance to show his Head above the Pickets, or his Body before a Port hole.

"This Enclosure contained about 100 small Dwellings closely built upon narrow Streets, a Council-house, a small Church and Barracks for the Troops. A wider Street, called the *Chemin du Ronde*, led around the Buildings adjacent to the pickets. The Buildings were of Wood and very liable to be set on Fire by burning Arrows. The Church was particularly exposed to this Casualty, as it stood near the Palisades, but the Indians were threatened by the French Priest [Father Potier] with the anger of the Great Spirit, if they did not desist from their Attempts to fire this Building. The Garrison by keeping constant Watch and plenty of Water in the Cistern, prevented Fires from taking."

It was an interesting quirk in the Indian mind that caused him to maintain his attitude of loyalty toward the French, who were seeking to invade his domain fully as much as the English. Perhaps, unconsciously, this feeling of brotherhood gave the savage a reason for his cruelties. Since the area of the stockaded fort was small, most of the settlers owned farms and gardens outside which ordinarily supplied their food. The cows, brought within the enclosure at nightfall, were driven to pasture each day. When these excursions were undertaken by the French, few casualties resulted; if, however, an Englishman ventured out, he was immediately felled by an arrow from the bow of the ever-watchful Indians.

LaButte was most active in his efforts to bring about a peace, always showing a fine loyalty to the English. It is surprising that the Indians displayed no spirit of resentment against him. On one occasion, at least, their patience was taxed: "Mr. La Butte went out several times, by order of the commander, to pacify the Indians and to try to get at their secrets by pumping them. But the Indians, and

especially Pondiac, got tired of his coming, and told him to go in and not come out again, or they would all pounce upon him."

On July 31, 1734, to LaButte had been confirmed a plot of ground three arpents wide and forty deep, which probably was the property referred to in the following: "On the north side of the fort, about half an arpent to the right of the gate, was a large garden, with the house of the gardner, both belonging to Mr. La Butte, the interpreter. All these buildings were so many retrenchments, under cover of which the Indians could approach the fort without danger. . . . The commander [Gladwin], who, though anxious, had never lost courage, ordered that . . . the garden of Mr. LaButte should be destroyed, which was done by Mr. [Jehu] Hay, an officer, who went out at the head of 40 volunteers and destroyed the garden, which was surrounded by a stockade ten feet high, and contained a number of fruit trees and a house, where the gardner lived, and which was of considerable advantage to the Indians. They tore out the palisades, burnt the house, cut the trees and threw them into the river."

Even the nightmare of war at length comes to an end, and the early autumn of 1763 saw at least a cessation, although the final peace was not concluded until two years later. With nerves ready to snap from the long weeks of strain, the settlers now had to face the rebuilding of their homes. Though the lives of the Frenchmen (in the main) had been spared by the Indians because of the general friendliness between the two races, the savages had killed their cattle, carried off the fruit from the orchards, burnt fences and cabins, and left the inhabitants in the direst destitution. Pierre Chêne *dit* LaButte, so far as we are able to ascertain, continued to live on Ste. Anne Street, serving as official interpreter to the Ottawa, and carrying on his affairs as merchant. That he was a pious man, devoted to his church, is fully attested by his gift of a thousand livres in merchandise to the Church of Ste. Anne. On May 16, 1774, with due ceremony, he was buried under the church which he had served so long and faithfully.

Four years later another member of the Chêne family was to be an important emissary for the British. Isidore, born on January 6, 1737, to Charles Chêne and Catherine Sauvage, was a nephew of Pierre Chêne *dit* LaButte. Following the calling of his uncle, he was for many years an interpreter, holding the rank of captain in the British Indian Department. His work was mainly with the Chippewa, Ottawa, and Potawatomi, for which, in 1778, he received 10s sterling per day, or about \$900 per year. While his name is appended as interpreter to many important documents pertaining to Indian councils and treaties, perhaps the most interesting connections are his participation in the siege of Boonsboro, Kentucky,

and in Governor Henry Hamilton's ill-fated expedition against Vincennes in the autumn of 1778. It was Chêne's duty to serve as interpreter and to aid in keeping the Indians at a pitch of eagerness to fight the Americans.

Under the leadership of Antoine Dagneaux Dequindre of Detroit, Hamilton sent a band of Shawnee with a few French to take the settlement of Boonsboro on the Kentucky River. The British had long wanted to put an end to this post, which was a constant source of irritation in their plan for the subjugation of the West. Daniel Boone, who had been captured and had been adopted by the Shawnee, made his escape, and returned to Boonsboro, ready to face the advancing savages, who, he knew, were bearing down from the north upon his village. Among the invaders was Isidore Chêne. Their expectation of an early surrender was doomed to disappointment. Boone, knowing well the Indian mind from his life among them, dallied along, granted a council, and appeared to consider with favor the treaty which proposed to carry the inmates of the fort back to Detroit. This was signed on September 9, 1778. The following morning, the third day of the siege, a pow wow was held to show the newly established good feeling. Boone, sensing trouble, had posted his men in the fort so that they commanded full sight of the little sycamore grove where the meeting was held, and could fire at a signal. His suspicions were justified, for instead of the older chiefs who had previously conferred, their place was taken by young braves who, as soon as the handshaking began, seized the Kentuckians. Instantly there was a volley of shot from the fort, and the surprised savages vanished into the hills and Boone and his companions rushed to the fort for safety.

There was little food, and the problem of ammunition was a source of grave concern. After a few days' respite, the Indians began a fierce attack upon the stockade which they continued for nine days. Luckily for the settlers, the September rains had soaked the roofs so that all attempts to set fire to the fort were of no avail. One ingenious experiment on the part of the garrison was the making of a wooden cannon, banded with iron and loaded with musket balls. Its first shot completely surprised and terrorized the savages, but unfortunately the second wrecked the improvised gun. Meantime, the Indians had started a tunnel from the Kentucky River which flowed along one side of the fort, apparently intending to burrow their way inside the stockade. Boone did not know what might be the outcome of this new measure, and many anxious hours were passed in speculation. Once again the drenching rain saved the settlers. The water-soaked ground gave way, causing

the walls of the tunnel to cave in. Discouraged, the savages, never fond of manual labor, gave up in disgust, and on September 16 began a leisurely retreat northward without having taken Boonsboro.

Just what Chêne's activities were during this period is not clear. From Boonsboro, he may have gone directly to Detroit, a distance of some 500 miles as the Indian traveled, or else joined Hamilton's party somewhere along the route to Vincennes. The Governor left Detroit on October 7, 1778, making the 600-mile journey to southern Indiana in 71 days, arriving at Vincennes on December 17. Here the British were in command until the capture of the fort by George Rogers Clark the following February 25. Chêne at this time was not staying within the stockade of Fort Sackville with the Governor's party, for as the Americans approached from the south, he and his two Indian companions were able to make their escape to the north and bring to Detroit the news of the fall of Vincennes. The consternation which this report wrought was great, for it had been rumored that Clark's next objective was Detroit. The fears of the British reacted upon their French and Indian allies, who became panic-stricken with the thought that the Long Knives would successfully drive them out of America.

Chêne brought the following report from Vincennes:

"Mr. Fran[çois] Maisonville having been sent after two Deserters fell in with four People from Fort Pitt who were going to Kaskaskas, two of whom he took with a Pacquet of letters—and on his return to the Post about six miles distant, he saw the remains of fifteen Fires. On his arrival he informed Lt. Gov^r. Hamilton of it, who demanded of the Prisoners if they could give him any farther information. They answered not—and the Governor immediately concluded they were some of Capt. Helms men who were coming to join him at the Post, not knowing any Kings Troops were there. The Governor then ordered Capt La Motte with 20 of his company to hold themselves in readiness, & they were sent off a little time afterwards with M^r Fran^s Maisonville as a Guide.

"Two hours after their departure, the Rebels entered at the lower end of the Village with a Drum beating and a White Colour flying, and proceeded immediately to the Houses of Major Le Gras and Capt. Bosron. They then marched up to the Fort, which they immediately invested. Capt. Chene who lived in the Village; not being able to get into the Fort, made his escape to the Wood, together with Egnseway, Chamintawa, Chiefs of the Ottawas, & Sastaritsi king of the Hurons—from the Wood, which he supposes distant from the Fort, a mile & a half he heard a smart firing all

Night, & now & then a great Gun from the Fort, about 11 at night, he with Sastaritsi and Egnsway attempted to enter the Village, but not finding it practicable, they returned again to the Wood, & in the morning were joined by the Petit Gres, Chief of the Miamis & three of his people. About 8 or 9 o'clock in the morning the firing ceas'd on both sides, and Capt. Chene a little time afterwards met with a Frenchman, who told him Gov^r Hamilton desired to Capitulate, the purport of which was to march out with the honors of war and return to Detroit. This Col. Clarke (he said) would by no means agree to, returning for answer, that he would not again leave it in his power to spirit up the Indian nations and scalp the Women & Children. Egnseway who had been about the Fort returned with the same acc^t. as the Frenchman. The firing began again on both sides about 12 oclock, and about 3 in the afternoon, Capt. Chene met with the Mess^{rs} Bolons, who had just come from the Village with their families, and confirm'd What he had before heard concerning the Capitulation, telling him at the same time that Capt. La Motte had got into the Fort that morning, with the loss of one man, who was made Prisoner. Capt. Chene, with the Indians retired a little farther into the wood, and towards sundown Egnseway once more set off for the Fort in order to get further information, he returned, with an account he had got from an Indian & a Frenchman, that seven of his nation was killed. The firing continued all night, & again ceas[e]d about 7 or 8 the next morning. About 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon Mons^r Chene & the Indians heard 9 Cannon Shot and a Pioria, came to them some time afterwards, and told them the Fort was taken. this was confirmed by a Frenchman, and a Miamis Chief & Egnseway who had been on the Decouverte, arrived some time afterwards with a Poutawatamis, the latter of whom saw the Virginians drawn up on each side of the Fort Gate to the number he thinks of 60, that after a talk of some time, the Gate was opened, that they all went in, & a little time afterwards he heard 9 great Gun's fire. This acc[oun]t was confirmed by a number of Indians and French people to Egnseway, who likewise told him, that only 5 of his people were killed, they further said that six soldiers were killed in the Fort and particularized the Master Gunner.

"Capt. Chene, who narrowly escaped being taken, the Virginians passing within 15 yards of him says their numbers could not have exceeded 60.

"The Indians who were killed had just returned from War, had made two Prisoners at the Fort upon the falls on the Ohio, and not knowing the Enemy were in the Village were there sur-

prized & kill[e]d, he further adds that 30 of the enemy were Creols of the different Villages on the English & Spanish sides of the Illinois.

"The master of the *Felicity* spoke with the *Wellcome* returning from the Miamis River, with goods on board intended for Post St Vincent; They report, that the Enemy amounted to 500 men with 60 Riffle-men, Virginians."

Of Chêne's personal life little is known. On November 28, 1758, he married Therese, daughter of Pierre Becquet and Marie Geneviève Vanier, and to them were born two daughters. In 1776 Governor Hamilton certified "That Wawiattin Chief of the Poutowatamis Nation having applied to me for liberty to cede a lot of Land of three acres in front in that Part of the Settlement of Detroit (called the Poutowatamis Village [present-day Private Claim 21]) to Isidore Chesne inhabitant of Detroit I have allowed the said Isidore Chesne to take Possession of it and to occupy the Said lot till notice be given relative to the cession of Lands by his excellency the governor of the Province." This grant Chêne sold to Joseph Porlier Benac two years later. One of his daughters, Marie Joseph, married, in 1780, François, son of the famous Daniel de Joncaire de Chabert. The young couple lived with the bride's parents, and in 1782 the two families are listed in a survey of Detroit as consisting of 2 married women; 3 hired men; 2 boys; 2 girls; 1 man and 1 woman slave; 5 horses; 6 oxen; 5 cows; 3 steers; 8 sheep; 7 hogs; 1200 bushels of flour; 32 bushels of wheat sown; 40 bushels of oats sown; 70 arpents of land cleared. Chêne was buried in Detroit on July 1, 1793, an interesting example of the uniting of the French, British, and Indian interests.

Many families, if carefully scanned, yield material for a law suit, and the Chêne family is no exception. In the fifth generation came Gabriel, seventh son of Charles Chêne and Marie Joseph Descomps. Born on the Southwest Coast of Detroit (near modern Sandwich) in 1772, the youth grew to manhood in Revolutionary Detroit. When his Uncle Isidore brought the news of Clark's victory, Gabriel was a lad of seven, and his small-boy imagination must have thrilled at hearing the fire-side tales of Chêne's flight through the wilderness of Indiana. The change from British to American rule, in 1796, was so gradual as not to cause serious discomfort along the Detroit River. Perhaps the people had been under so many flags that the addition of the Stars and Stripes was not as upsetting as in a district where one nation had always held sway. When the United States established the third government in the City of the Straits, the validity of land claims caused more heart-aches and purse shrinkages than any other factor. The citizens were given their choice of swearing

allegiance to the new republic or remaining British subjects and moving to the south side of the river. Some went immediately, as did Angus McIntosh, who built Moy House which stood until recent years in Windsor. Others, like John Askin, did not make the formal break until later; in fact, in 1802 he was named one of Detroit's first trustees. Marriages of the daughters of the French and British to progressive young Yankees did much to create the amity of feeling which yet exists between Detroit and Windsor.

Land, however, offered a more difficult problem. Many titles were dependent upon Indian grants, some upon French, and still others upon British—all had to be clarified and recorded in a manner to suit the young government in Washington which was rather slow in organizing this corner of its wide-spread domain. The Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library has many letters expressing vain hopes and bitter disappointments over the failure of the United States to validate claims for which their owners had paid in good faith. True, the "payment" had varied all the way from a keg of rum to hard cash, but the owners felt none the less abused.

It was during these friendly yet uncertain times that Gabriel Chêne courted and married Geneviève Campau, and thereby began a tangle which was to vex the Michigan courts for years to come.

The first of her line to brave the unknown West was Étienne, who came from France to Montreal, and there married in 1663, just one hundred years before Pontiac was to become so troublesome to his descendants in Detroit. His son, Jacques, a toolsmith by trade, felt there were better opportunities in Cadillac's new village, and moved his family thence in the early autumn of 1708. Here on July 10, 1734, was confirmed to him a tract later known as Private Claim 18. Five days earlier his eldest son, Jean Louis, had obtained a cession 5 by 40 arpents, now registered as Private Claim 733, extending eastward from Chêne Street towards Joseph Campau Street. This became the family homestead, and upon his death was inherited by his son, Jean Baptiste, father of the Geneviève whom Gabriel Chêne married.

Seven years after this marriage, family circumstances made it advisable to arrange for the care of Jean Baptiste, then approaching sixty years, and a younger sister, Archange; and to this end a family council was called. Times were hard, Jacques Baby held a mortgage for \$2,500 against the house, the old gentleman owed about \$1,000 in miscellaneous debts, and he had reached the time of life when he wished to be relieved of such worries. In solemn conclave they sat, the nine living sons and daughters (there were eighteen in the family) accompanied by their respective husbands and wives. Jean Baptiste made his offer: "Under these circumstances I am willing

to convey my farm to whomever among my sons will pay all my just debts, especially a certain one to Jacques Baby, provided the same shall not exceed \$2,500; and if the same should fall short of that sum, he is to pay me on demand the difference. And further, he is to support me during my lifetime and my daughter Archange until her majority [she was then fourteen]." The flood of discussion which followed this announcement may well be imagined. Private Claim 733 containing 211.55 acres was a plum worth having, but the proverbial fly tainted the otherwise sweet ointment. Old Jean Baptiste was of a difficult temperament. How long would he live, and how could family peace and harmony be maintained? In the end it was not a son, but a son-in-law, Gabriel Chêne, husband of Geneviève Campau, who offered to comply with the old man's stipulations, and the necessary papers were duly signed while the other Campaus, with shaking heads, were loathe to see the land pass to one of another name. Old Simon, brother of Jean Baptiste, well knew his brother, and his remark indicates that Gabriel was to earn his gift, "Poor little beggar [Gabriel], he is braver than I to undertake such a thing, and if he gets through with it, the estate will be very well his." Thus, on May 27, 1800, P. C. 733, became the property of Gabriel Chêne.

"The original homestead," wrote Richard R. Elliott, "was, as usual, on the river front. It was a substantial frame building, the main part double storied, with dormer windows, rested upon a substantial stone foundation, and at each end was a one-story wing; a broad hall extended through from south to north, and at each end of the main building were massive stone chimneys; in fact, the old family homestead of the Campau-Chêne families resembled very much the homes of the French proprietors on the river front from the River Rouge to the St. Clair."

Jean Baptiste Campau died in 1819, and all accounts seem to point to the fact that Gabriel did not entirely live up to his part of the agreement; however, remembering Simon's qualifying remark, one is prone to surmise that the testy old Jean Baptiste perhaps made it well nigh impossible to comply. Stormy scenes resulted, of that one may be sure.

On October 29, 1805, Gabriel Chêne, in the name of his father-in-law, had appeared before the land commissioners to show the French origin of the grant and to have the claim properly recorded. It was surveyed by Aaron Greeley in 1810, and ownership acknowledged by the American government.

Gabriel died in 1830, bequeathing the land to his son, Gabriel II, during his lifetime, and after his death, provided that it should descend to the male heirs of the latter. A few years later (1837)

it became expedient for Gabriel II to sell a parcel of the farm "to care for the education and support of his minor sons." And so, a certain plot was sold to John Norvell, and eventually to Alexander D. Fraser. Peaceful ownership was not yet assured, for in 1847, the heirs of Jean Baptiste Campau brought suit to regain the old farm, stating that Gabriel Chêne I had not lived up to his part of the agreement whereby he had acquired it from his father-in-law. The Court agreed that the conditions had not worked out to mutual satisfaction, but maintained that the deed was neither one of trust nor one of condition, for breach of which the grantor or his heirs might re-enter upon the said premises; and thus in 1850, the farm became, by decision of the Court, the property of the Chêne family.

Once again the Court was called in to arbitrate when Fraser's title to the land purchased from Norvell (and by him from Gabriel Chêne II) was questioned by the Chêne heirs. According to the account by Elliott, "To clear his title Mr. Fraser commenced a suit entitled 'Fraser vs. Chêne and others,' in 1851, which was finally heard before the Supreme Court of Michigan, of which Charles W. Whipple was chief justice, and Warner Wing, Sanford M. Green and Abner Pratt associate justices.

"In this suit the sons of Gabriel Chêne II were made the defendants; but the plaintiff was in fact the father of the defendants, whose only source of income was the rents and sales of the land of the Chêne farm, and who assisted Mr. Fraser in the prosecution of the suit, the decision of which would either leave him a rich proprietor or a comparatively poor man.

"Probably one of the ablest documents emanating from a member of the old bar of Detroit was the brief of Alexander D. Fraser in this celebrated case. He reviewed the laws of primogeniture and quoted freely from recognized authorities to prove that no estate could be entailed in this state and that Gabriel Chêne II had an allodial or absolute right to the property in question, to control and to dispose of it or any part of it without question.

"The defendants were not represented by counsel, and the Court held that Mr. Fraser's position and arguments were uncontestable and gave judgment in his favor."

Today, Detroit's *Directory* lists many Chênes and LaButtes, the blood of Pierre and his young wife, who died in Montreal, having continued in the male line well over two centuries. Some of P. C. 733 is still owned by his descendants. In 1857 Chêne Street was named to honor Gabriel II. Thus did one French immigrant boy found a family which was to become part and parcel of America's fourth largest city.

